

Testimony of Richard Dennis

March 9, 2012 before the Judiciary Committee

For HB 5388: An Act Concerning Court Fees And The Delivery Of Legal Services To The Poor

My name is Richard Dennis and I live in East Haven, Connecticut. Legal aid recently helped me with my unemployment case. I had worked for the same construction company for about seven years and never expected to leave. When the company started having financial problems, things got really bad. They didn't have enough money to cover payroll, so the direct deposit stopped and I got stuck with overdraft fees. I found out that the company had stopped contributing money to our 401K accounts. The president, my boss, let almost all of the other employees go. When customers got mad because no one showed up for jobs, and when subcontractors got mad because they didn't get paid, they called my cell phone and yelled at me, at all hours of the day and night. But I put up with it because I needed the job.

I started looking for another job and planned to stay until I found one, but my boss started acting very strange. He collected guns and had a lot of them around the office. I started to notice bullet holes in a truck parked outside the warehouse. One day, I was working and my boss shot a gun right inside the office, into a bulletproof vest hanging on the wall. I didn't feel safe any more and I gave my notice. I applied for unemployment benefits so that my family would have something to live on until I found another job. When I explained why I left, the unemployment office granted me the benefits.

The company appealed and I had to go to a hearing. I thought it would be okay, since I the unemployment office had already approved me. Just to be sure, I asked two former coworkers who had also seen the boss fire a gun at work if they would be witnesses. They couldn't come to the hearing because they were working, but they said the referee could call them. When I got to the hearing, my boss lied and said that he had never fired a gun at work, and the referee believed him. I asked the referee to call my witnesses, but he refused. The decision I got in the mail not only cut off my benefits but said I could even have to repay the benefits I had already gotten, about \$3,000 which I had already spent. I called legal aid and they agreed to help. My lawyer filed a motion to get another hearing. She went to the new hearing with me and she made sure that the referee listened to my witnesses. He finally believed me and I ended up winning the case.

I'm not on unemployment anymore, I found a new job. I actually took a day off from work today just so I could be here. I was stuck in a horrible situation with unemployment and without legal aid I would not have been able to appeal on my own. I am the main provider for my wife and 3 children, my wife is a part-time school bus driver, the stress of not being able to pay my bills or put food on my table was a burden and I wouldn't wish this on anyone. I was cut from my benefits for 7 weeks and went through what was left of our savings to stay afloat. Thanks to legal aid and my attorney I won my case with unemployment and all funds were released and I was able to pay everything before I fell behind. Legal aid is very important to people like me who can't afford a lawyer and have no where else to turn. Without them I could have lost everything.